

AL-GHAZZALI'S EPISTLE OF THE BIRDS

A TRANSLATION OF THE RISĀLAT AL-ṬAYR

Students of al-Ghazzālī are constantly confronted by his use of previous material with or without acknowledging its source. The pages of his major work, the *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, for example, echo with the words of the *Qūt al-Qulūb*¹ of abu-Ṭālib al-Makki.² Furthermore, its physical divisions follow previous patterns of literary composition. Desiring to insure for his ideas the widest circulation possible, he modelled his work, only in form, after the most popular books of the day. These dealt with jurisprudence, and were always divided into four parts, one for each of the component parts of the discipline, namely the Koran, the usage of the Prophet (*al-sunnah*), catholic consent (*al-ijmā'*), and analogy (*al-qiyās*). He was not the first Moslem writer to employ this device. He himself alludes³ to the *Taqwīm al-Abdān* (Tables of Physiology) of ibn-Jazlah⁴ (d. A. H. 493/A.D. 1100), which, like the earlier *Taqwīm al-Ṣiḥḥah* (Tables of Health) of ibn-Buṭlān⁵ (d. A. H. 455/A.D. 1063), was a medical work modelled, for the purpose of gaining a wider audience, after the then very popular astronomical tables. A man with a mission, he felt impelled to use all available material and methods to drive home his point. What is true of his major work is true of his lesser works and pamphlets. This is particularly so in the case of the present tract, the *Risālat al-Ṭayr*.⁶ For a model he must have had before him a pamphlet by the same title⁷ written

by ibn-Sīna (d. A.D. 1037), whom al-Ghazzālī considered an unbeliever.⁸ Throughout his career, al-Ghazzālī sought to refute the philosophy of ibn-Sīna and to discredit his school. He, therefore, addressed himself to the same problem, and used the same literary technique, only to set forth another solution. Both tracts treat of the salvation of man. But while ibn-Sīna develops the theme that man works out his own salvation by his own hands and efforts, al-Ghazzālī contends that salvation is by faith. In fact he believes in election. The trials and tribulations which visit man in this life prepare him for the life to come. But whether he is saved or not depends upon the will of God, the sovereign ruler of the universe. In the case of ibn-Sīna, he must have had in mind the parable of al-Ḥamāmah al-Muṭawwaqah from the *Kalilah wa-Dimnah*. The stories are developed along parallel lines. But while the intent of the Pidpai fable is ethical and moral, that of ibn-Sīna's is philosophical. Al-Ghazzālī elevates it to the religious and spiritual. He had tried ethics and philosophy, but found them wanting. They had their place and utility, but had failed to supply man with a unifying principle for life, or illumine his path to salvation. Religion on the other hand transforms life from one disunited, useless, and unhappy to one which is united, useful, and happy. It is "the light which illuminates the threshold of all knowledge".⁹

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THE EPISTLE OF THE BIRDS

Once upon a time the different species of birds gathered together in order to select a king to rule over them. They agreed that the phoenix was the bird best fitted for that purpose. They had heard that the phoenix lived in the west on a certain island. They, therefore, decided to proceed hence, to stand in its court and have the pleasure of placing themselves at its service.

¹ *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl* (Cairo, n.d.), p. 11.

² *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*, p. 6.

¹ Festsch, Cairo, 1331.

² Muḥammad ibn-'Alī ibn-'Atīyah, d. A. H. 386/A.D. 996; see Ibn-Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-A'yan* (Cairo, 1299), vol. II, p. 297; al-Sam'ani, *Kitāb al-Ansāb*, ed. D. S. Margoliouth (London, 1912), I, 541a.

³ *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (Cairo, 1334), vol. I, pp. 4-5.

⁴ *Al-Kāfi*, vol. III, pp. 255-6; ibn-abī-Uṣaybi'ah, *Ṭūḥ al-Anbā' fī Ṭabaqāt al-ʿUyūn* (Cairo, 1299), vol. I, p. 255.

⁵ *Al-Kāfi*, vol. I, pp. 241-3.

⁶ The translation has been based on the text edited by L. Cheikho in *al-Mashriq*, vol. IV (1911), pp. 21-23, and that published in Cairo, together with nine other tracts by al-Ghazzālī, A. H. 1353.

⁷ *Risālat al-Ṭayr*, also known as *Risālat al-Shabakah w-al-Ṭayr*; ed. by L. Cheikho in *al-Mashriq*, vol. IV (1911), pp. 882-7.

Come let us go to Layla's house,
And gain admission and announce:
Our purpose is to see her there,
And our homage and love declare.

Thereupon their latent yearnings surged in their hearts,
and inspired them to wax poetic and say:

In what part of the world can we ever meet,
If, like a king, access to thee is barred?

As they were about to start, they heard a voice from beyond the clouds say, "Throw not yourself with your own hands into ruin; rather, stay where you are and leave not your place; for if you depart from your native land you will double your anxiety and add to your sorrows. Beware, therefore, of exposing yourselves to danger and of playing with fire."

Safety from Su'da's choking clutches,
And freedom from her neighbour's grip,
Depend on shunning their lure and bait,
And keeping far from their hearth and home.

But when they heard this warning from the unseen world of might, their longing increased, and they became restless, perplexed, and sleepless.

If all the doctors should prescribe,
For your love-lorn and aching heart,
Anything but Layla's soothing words,
Their effort is worthless from the start.

For it is a fact that:

Nought shall satisfy his loving heart,
Or soothe its aches and flaming anguish,
Except that he and his only love
Shall live and love 'neath one single roof.

Their hearts swelled with grief and anguish, and their heads were filled with folly and madness. The joys and ecstasies of expectation drowned all thoughts of hesitation and doubt, and they embarked upon their hazardous journey, without counting the cost. Indeed they were warned

that before them lay extensive wastes, high mountains, and deep treacherous seas, frigid regions and torrid zones—insurmountable obstacles which lead to destruction and death. They were urged to be content with what they had, lest they be driven to ruin by greed. But all was in vain: they would not listen or heed the warning. Instead they set out on their journey saying:

Whenever a person is lorn and lonesome,
And his need is great, the help is scant.

Then each and every one of them mounted ambition, bridled with longing and saddled with love, and pushed on saying:

O'er creg and vale, by day and night,
My mount and I press on and on;
The thought of union with my love,
Sustains my will to fight and win;
To stand before her radiant face,
And with my arms her neck embrace.

They deviated from the paths of freedom, and were drawn into the lanes of necessity and compulsion. Those who hailed from the torrid zone died of cold in the frigid region, and those who came from the frigid region perished of heat in the torrid zone. They were struck by thunderbolts and lashed by storms. Only a few escaped and reached the island of the king safely.

They then sought audience with the king; but when audience was denied them, they begged that someone tell the king of their presence on the island. Upon hearing of their presence the king ordered one of the royal attendants to inquire of them concerning the nature of their mission. When they informed him that they came in order to invite the king to rule over them and be their sovereign lord, they were told, "In vain have you troubled yourselves, for whether you like it or not, whether you come or go, we are your king and sovereign lord, and we have no need for you." When they saw that they were not wanted, they felt embarrassed and ashamed, and became discouraged and downcast. A feeling of bewilderment encompassed them,

and a sense of awe terrified them. They then realized that it was impossible for them to return to their native land. They had no strength left in them. In despair they wished to be left alone to die on the island.

Would the desert folk take in this humble guest
Whom night has overtaken by their camp?
He would be content if they would extend
To him a gracious look and kindly word.

But plague spread among them, and they were on the verge of complete annihilation. They, therefore, resorted to prayer, their only hope.

Drunk and dizzy of love's bitter cup,
Each to his neighbour was a nurse.

Then just as they sank into the depths of despair, and became sick of life itself, a ray of hope suddenly broke upon them, and they heard a voice say: You need not lose hope, for no one "despairs of the mercy of God except those who are doomed to perdition."¹¹ For while the limit in wealth results in pride, and turns down all requests, the beautiful quality of generosity demands benevolence, and heeds all petitions. And now that you have known the extent of your ignorance regarding our rank and position, it behooves us to give you shelter. For this our house is the abode of generosity and the dwelling place of munificence. It seeks out the poor who have shunned security and ease. But for this dwelling place, the lord of all creatures and the foremost among them would not have said, "Grant me a life of poverty. O Lord."¹² Furthermore he who becomes aware of his lack of merit is worthy to be accepted by the king, the phoenix, as his peer and companion.

When at long last hope displaced despair in their hearts, and cheer replaced dejection therein, they felt sure of the outpouring of generosity, and certain of the downpouring of grace. Thereupon they inquired about their companions saying: What has become of those with whom we have

traversed extensive wastes, and in whose company we crossed valleys deep and wide? Has their blood been shed in vain, or would it be compensated by mulct or bloodwit? "Not in the least", was the reply, since "if any shall leave his home and fly to God and His Apostle, and death overtake him—his reward from God is sure."¹³ They were chosen by the hand of fate after they have been proved and tried. "And say not of those who were slain on the path of God that they are dead; nay, they are living!"¹⁴ Again they asked: What has become of those who were drowned in the deep, and failed to reach their destination? And again the reply came, "And repute not those slain on the path of God to be dead; nay they are living!"¹⁵ For he who has brought you here and caused them to die, has also brought them back to life; and he who has stirred in you the feeling of longing, so that you embarked upon this tiresome and hazardous journey in search of your goal, has called them unto himself, and carried them away, and brought them nigh unto him, and favoured them with proximity to him. They are the veils of majesty and the curtains of power. (They recline) "on the seat of truth, in the presence of the potent king."¹⁶ Thereupon they said: Is it at all possible for us to see them? In reply to this request they were told, "No. For you are (separated from them) by the veils of majesty and the curtains of humanity; you are the chained prisoners of time. But if you fulfil your purpose and depart from your homes, you will then exchange visitations and meet." They then asked: And what has become of those who were detained by greed and negligence, and, therefore, did not embark upon this journey? In answer to their question, they were told, "Had they been desirous to take the field, they would have got ready for that purpose the munitions of war. But God was averse to their marching forth, and made them laggards."¹⁷ If we wanted them we would have called them; but we were averse to them, and consequently, we

¹¹ Based on *Sūrah xii: 87*.

¹² *Al Tirmidhi, Sahih, Zuhd: 37*.

¹³ *Sūrah iv: 101*.

¹⁴ *Sūrah ii: 149*.

¹⁵ *Sūrah iii: 163*.

¹⁶ *Sūrah iv: 56*.

¹⁷ *Sūrah ix: 46*.

drove them away. Did you yourselves come by yourselves, or did we ourselves call you? Did you yourselves long to come, or did we stir the feeling of longing in you? We ourselves have moved you, and carried you and them over land and sea." When they heard that, they rejoiced at the fulfilment of providence and the pledge of care. Thereupon their joy became perfect and their trust complete. They felt secure therein and tranquil, and faced the substance of faith with steadfastness, and were freed by continual calm from vacillation and change.

I wonder, is there any difference between the person repairing to the island and the postulant (*mubtadi*)¹⁸ who has resolved in his heart to do so. For the postulant says, "We have come to our king." But he who returns to his original life ("O thou soul which art at rest, return to thy Lord"¹⁹) returns to hear the call. When he is told, "Why have you come?", he replies, "Why have I been called?", nay, "Why have I been carried to that land which is the land of favoured proximity?". At any rate, the reply depends upon the question, and the question upon the amount of insight, and accomplishment upon aspiration.

He who is disposed to relish such witticisms had better renew his acquaintance with the language of the birds and the realms of the spirit. For the language of the birds is not understood except by him who belongs to the kingdom of the birds. To renew the acquaintance therewith entails the constant use of ablutions, faithful observation of the appointed hours of prayer, and the spending of at least an hour of solitude in remembrance. This is the sweet renewal of acquaintance. In fact there are only two ways. "Therefore, remember me: I will remember you";²⁰ or, "They have forgotten God, and He hath forgotten them."²¹ Therefore, to him who persists in the path of remembrance shall be said, "I am the friend of him who remembers me"; and

¹⁸ For the definition of *mubtadi*, see al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-Luma'*, ed. R. A. Nicholson (Leiden, 1910), p. 341.

¹⁹ Sūrah al-Baqara: 278.

²⁰ Sūrah al-Baqara: 147.

²¹ Sūrah al-Baqara: 65.

to him who follows the road of neglect and forgetfulness shall be declared, "And whoso shall turn away from the remembrance of God, we shall appoint a devil for him, and he shall be his companion."²² Every single person is a follower of one or the other of these two categories. On the day of resurrection each will have one or the other of the two marks: the criminals will be known by their mark, and the righteous by theirs. "Their marks are on their faces, because of the effect of prostration."²³

May God, by His good favour, save you, and guide your footsteps into the way of truth.

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The Westernization of Arabia

In a paper on the possibility of union among the Arab States (*American Historical Review*, July, 1943) Professor Philip Hitti points to the contrast between the Arabs of the Fertile Crescent and those in Arabia proper. From Syria to Iraq there is a strong westernization movement. But he goes on to say:

In this respect the Arabian quadrilateral stands in marked contrast to the Arab crescent, especially to its western horn Syria-Palestine and Lebanon. The emergence of the ultraconservative, puritanical Wahhabis under ibn-al-Sa'ud as the leading community in the peninsula after the first World War represents the extremity of the pendulum swing in that direction in Islam. The swing toward the other extreme of Westernization and secularization is represented by the Kemalist Turks. *The Turks and the Wahhabis* represent opposite extremes in modern Islamic movements. If the post-war Turks proved to be the "protestants of Islam," the Wahhabis proved to be the greatest conformists—the sporadic and superficial attempt at modernization by ibn-al-Sa'ud notwithstanding.

Equally immune to European secular ideas are the Zaydis of al-Yaman, whose Imam, Yahya, is even more provincial than his rival to the north. Rivalry between these two, the strongest potentates of Arabia proper, deep-seated hostility between the Ikhwan followers of the one and the Zaydis of the other, together with the low level of culture throughout and the narrow horizon and particularism of political life, preclude the possibility of any immediate *rapprochement* and a gravitation toward a common center of Pan-Arabism. The rest of Arabia, including the Trucial Coast on the Persian Gulf, has been for decades weaned from the motherland and, under British influence, oriented India-ward.

²² Sūrah al-Baqara: 35.

²³ Sūrah al-Baqara: 29.